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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the various findings contained in the current literature on humor in the workplace. In recent years, the communicative role of humor in the workplace has received attention--particularly in management-related publications. Consequently, the paper explores the emergence of humor as a management tool and the advantages and disadvantages of humor in work settings. Finally, specific applications of humor in the organizational setting are identified and directions for future research addressed (for example, the need for research on the "fine line" between humor and harassment in the workplace and longitudinal studies on how humor affects productivity and turnover rate of workers). Contains 25 references. (Author/RS)

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Humor in the Workplace: A Communication Challenge

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Abstract

This essay examines some of the various findings contained in the current literature on humor in the workplace. In recent years, the communicative role of humor in the workplace has received added attention--particularly in management-related publications. Consequently, this essay explores the emergence of humor as a management tool and the advantages and disadvantages of humor in work settings. Finally, specific applications of humor in the organizational setting are identified and directions for future research addressed.

Humor in the Workplace: A Communication Challenge

The use of humor in the workplace is a growing area of research interest--particularly in management-related publications. While in the early 1980s there were a handful of articles about humor on the job, within the past four years management publications have discovered that humor plays an important role in corporate culture. As with other communication choices in organizations, the more astute one is regarding the uses and misuses of humor, the more effectively one is perceived. Therefore, it is imperative that individuals understand the negative and positive consequences of humor, and that managers understand that organizations can have a sense of humor.

Most observers of the organizational communication setting agree that humor in the workplace often starts with a particular state of mind or atmosphere. Managers or supervisors help set a tone that fosters or squelches humor. This essay will examine the emergence of humor as a management tool and the advantages and disadvantages of humor in work settings. Finally, specific applications of humor in the organizational setting will be identified and directions for future research addressed.

The Emergence of Humor

According to Ross (1988) recognition of humor as a tool for the manager of the 1990s is in stark contrast to the industrial era's tools of control and intimidation. Jaffe (1990) reinforced this suggestion when he noted that there was only one page devoted to employee morale in a 1922 edition of The Management Handbook. Today, many organizations still resist the idea that fun and work are compatible. Buhler (1991) stated:

> Just as corporate America took time to evaluate the necessity for conflict in organizations in the 80s, so too it will be with humor in the 90s. The astute manager of the 1990s will recognize this acceptance of humor in the workplace. (p. 21)

The efficacy of humor as a tool has been observed by Davis and Kleiner (1989) when they noted that productivity can be increased by well-timed humor. They linked the timing issue with good leadership. A good leader has learned how and when to use levity to meet goals. Thomas (1988) concluded that humor in the workplace is neither inherently good or bad. It is not a panacea for production or morale problems, but it may be particularly useful because it helps people view a problem in a different light. Additionally, humor can help define the personality of a company. . . or give a company personality.

These aspects of humor, largely ignored until the late 1980s, have suddenly caught the business world's attention. Funny business has become serious business as evidenced by a new breed of consultants sometimes called "humor experts" (see Allison, 1991 and Russell and Calvacca, 1991). Both large and small companies, have hired such consultants for advice on cultivating spirit, alleviating stress, improving communication, and diffusing conflict.

Malec (1992) noted that humor consultants helped ease the Tennessee Valley Authority through a transition phase with the use of humor. Allison (1991) expressed the belief that C.W. Metcalf & Company's workshop called "Humor, Risk, and Change," was a probable component in a 10% increase in employee productivity at Digital Equipment Corporation in Colorado.

Metcalf and Felible (1992) justify the need for the role of humor consultant with disturbing data about American workers. They report that a survey by Northwestern National Life Insurance found that 34% of U.S. workers said they had considered quitting their jobs in 1990 because of excessive stress while 14% actually did quit their jobs because of excessive stress. Humor is a key to reducing stress and related burn out.

Metcalf took his Humaerobics training to over 150 companies in 1991. His training emphasizes three skills, which include: (1) the ability to see the absurdity in difficult situations, (2) the ability to take oneself lightly while taking one's work seriously, and (3) a disciplined sense of joy in being alive (cited in McKenna, 1992, p. 20).

The emergence of humor as good business is apparent. The advantages to the business environment are many, but initially the parameters for constructive use of humor must be established. An examination of the impact of humor illustrates that the power of humor is elusive and sometimes erratic.

The Essence of Humor

Recognition that communication is a complex phenomenon with many intervening variables is a prerequisite to understanding the effects of humor in the organizational setting. Communication scholars have been aware of the fact that humor is very situational for quite some time. What one person finds amusing, another may find annoying or offensive. Organizations are a complex mix of communication settings and what is effective in one context, a small group, for example, isn't necessarily effective in a large meeting, or one on one.

Studies have been inconclusive regarding attitudinal shifts as a result of humor, although most would agree that humor does help maintain attention.

Mendleson, Golen, and Adams (1986) reiterated what scholars in the field of communication have noted previously:

> Humor is very subjective, and conditions under which it does or does not enhance perception of message and speaker are unclear. Humor can alienate as readily as it can endear. Guidelines include: (1) matching it to the situation, (2) knowing one's limitations and one's audience, and (3) avoiding offensive humor. (p. 8)

Krohe (1987) cautioned that there is a gender gap in humor--men and women enjoy different kinds of humor. And while some consultants recommend self-effacing humor, it can backfire in certain situations. Status differentials and perceived competence are variables which would no doubt influence the effectiveness of self-effacing humor.

The Positive Effects of Humor

The literature on humor seemingly could be divided into four major topic areas in regard to the positive application of humor: leadership enhancement, social benefits, psychological, and physical enhancement.

Sleeter (1981) noted a decade ago that a good manager must understand humor and its uses. He suggested that a manager without a good sense of humor was at a distinct disadvantage because this type of individual is inhibited, and unemotional. Davis and Kleiner (1989) explored leadership and humor and emphasized what types of humor leaders should use and what ends humor might achieve. Stress reduction, greater understanding of managements goals, and motivation were three suggested benefits of humor.

Gender also influences the use and impact of humor. Russell and Calvacca (1991) reported that a recent study on influence in the business setting concluded that men were much more likely than women to use kidding and joking as an influence tactic. In her widely read book on male/female communication, Tannen (1990) suggested that conversation in mixed-group interaction is a male domain. Men typically are the "humorists" in a group situation. Women are more concerned about being taken seriously and less comfortable holding "center stage in a group."

Noting that women have avoided humor for fear of not being taken seriously in work settings, Barbara Mackoff, author of What Mona Lisa Knew: A Woman's Guide to Getting Ahead in Business by Lightening Up (1991) believes that being too serious can prevent women from getting ahead in business. She suggests that humor is a powerful tool which will project women into key roles in companies. Equally plausible is the possibility that women have attained enough status in some organizations to now feel empowered to use humor. Perhaps it wasn't lack of humor which caused lack of status, but rather lack of status which resulted in lack of humor. Lower status persons may be more reluctant to use humor (and exert the control to deviate from task-related pursuits) in business settings.

Of central importance to leadership, regardless of gender, is Russell and Clavacca's (1991) assertion that, "Demonstrating a sense of humor is one way of conveying authority and self-confidence--attributes that are very important in a leader" (p. 128). Finally, Buhler (1991) reported that research has shown that managers displaying a good sense of humor are given more opportunities in organizations than those without a sense of humor.

The social benefits of humor, such as group cohesiveness, reduction of status differentials, diffusion of conflict, team and trust building among diverse groups, are perhaps the most widely recognized value of humor. Company teams have been in existence for decades and are used as a fun, informal setting which can foster positive socialization. Activities like dress up days, parades, walkathons, or even a bulletin board for posting humorous materials can help bond people.

Berg (1990) says that among other uses, humor helps individuals view themselves and others more objectively and helps build rapport, trust, and acceptance of diversity among team members. Towler (1990) stated that happy workers are more productive because enjoyable interaction with coworkers reduces the need to get social support outside the workplace. Employees who enjoy being together are more supportive and productive of one another. The common experience provided by shared humor can serve as a binding force for employees.

There appear to be many psychological benefits reaped from the use of humor. Morreall (1991) posited that humor promotes health, mental flexibility, and smooths social relationships. He emphasized that humor involves the mental advantages of "balance or novelty, ambiguity, change, divergent thinking, creative problem solving, and risk taking. Of particular interest is the suggestion that humor might supplant or ward off unproductive negative emotions associated with a loss of control and therefore defuse conflict and reduce feelings of hostility. Gorkin (1990) stated that humor appears to stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain, which, in turn, sets off divergent, creative thinking which allows individuals to see broader

applications, novel connections, and otherwise elusive relationships. Towler (1990) touted humor's ability to counteract boredom and stress on the job.

Numerous articles address the value of humor as a stress reliever (Gorkin, 1990; Buhler, 1991; Caudron, 1992; McKenna, 1992.) Humor may function in a many different ways to relieve stress. There is convincing evidence that laughter can be good for physical health by relaxing muscles, strengthening the immune system, and increasing the flow of oxygen to the brain (Suchetka, 1992). Laughter increases brain activity and appears to release the body's natural pain-killing hormones (Smith, 1991).

While the advantages of humor for leadership and the physical, psychological, and social functioning of the individual compel the use of humor, there are possible negative effects as well.

The Negative Effects of Humor

As stated previously, humor is extremely subjective. Russell and Calvacca (1991) state that you should ask yourself whether your audience shares your point of view. "If you feel inclined to say, 'I hope this won't offend anyone, but . . . ' forget the joke" (p. 128). If your comment is sarcastic, irrelevant, or highly self-deprecating, it probably isn't a good choice to use humor.

Similarly, humor of malicious intent can be a very counterproductive force in the workplace. For example, sexual or racial slurs can be quite destructive and offensive--causing a threatening atmosphere. Given increased public awareness, sexually oriented humor has become a delicate issue. It is important to recognize that humor can be aggressive, hostile, and an assertion of power when it is sexist or racist. Malicious or negative humor

not only destroys cohesiveness but jeopardizes companies from the standpoint of harassment litigation.

Other problems can result when humor evolves into horseplay. Some disadvantages of too much horseplay can be a disruption of productivity, damaged property, and safety hazards (Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap, 1990).

Finally, there are certain professions and workplace situations where humor must be used judiciously. Physicians and airline pilots, for example, are involved in professions where a level of seriousness is attached to their credibility. Thus, as noted by Buhler (1991) inappropriate or overuse of humor can be as detrimental to the workplace as the total absence of humor.

Applications of Humor

Humor as a trend in management is distinguished in recent years from past years by the conscious notion that it is a tool for improved morale and productivity. Examples of some of the ways in which humor has been utilized help illustrate that the new "organized levity" goes beyond a funny quip or a wry observation.

A recent development at a few innovative companies is the use of what is called a "humor room" (Suchetka, 1992). Eastman Kodak Corporation has such a room where employees can go watch videos. A designated "humor room" could be especially useful in companies that rely on creative contributions such as advertising agencies.

Meetings are another place where companies are experimenting with humor. Some companies have used a revolving "jokemaster" to provide a joke to open meetings. Surprisingly, one opening joke can set a positive tone for an entire meeting (Ross, 1988).

Jaffee (1990) cites numerous examples of "management by fun" and suggests that often highly competitive industries with pressure to perform turn to fun to reduce tension. A "joke of the week board" or a blackboard for "graffiti" may tell a manager what is on people's minds through the less threatening venue of humor.

While dress up days, Halloween parties, and ice cream socials send an organization-wide message, managers have an opportunity to send subtle one-on-one messages to employees. Mackoff (1991) cites an example of a personnel manager whose department was given an unpleasant and thankless task. They arrived at work the next day and found their last names on their nameplates changed to Dangerfield--since they weren't getting any respect.

It is evident that there are many forums for humor which can improve morale, motivation, and general enjoyment on the job. Based upon the literature currently available, there are several areas which deserve further research.

Future Directions in Research

The fine line between humor and harassment needs to be more boldly drawn. In the evolution from discouraging humor to encouraging humor in the workplace, a determination of appropriate behavior is still elusive. As humor is encouraged there may be more research dealing with handling humor which a worker finds offensive.

More longitudinal studies are needed on how humor affects productivity and the turnover rate of workers. Present claims appear to be more anecdotal than statistically supported.

Researchers need to further examine the occupational dimensions of workplace humor. Are certain professions more conducive to humor than others? How important is humor and how can it be implemented on assembly line jobs? What types of humor work best in particular contexts? What types of humor proliferate in various contexts? For example, researchers might be surprised by the use of "gallows humor" in some professions.

Communication research should be updated regarding the impact of humor. Without an understanding of the complexity of the communication context, management research may provide simplistic advice on the effect of humor. The field of communication should be at the forefront of examining humor in the workplace.

Finally, Stephen Covey's (1989) notion of "personality ethic" versus "character ethic" provides a framework for understanding the communicative use of humor. Covey suggests that the personality ethic which has guided management is a short term, quick fix, set of "skills" designed to change people from the outside in. Character ethics, on the other hand, are deeply held convictions which guide ethics and change people from the inside out. As such, it is important that managers truly believe that humor is an intrinsic part of living and working. If humor is seen as a manipulative tool in the arsenal of management, it will ultimately fail. If humor is viewed as a natural outgrowth of healthy people and healthy organizational communication, it will succeed.

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